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Analysis of the populist discourse of Lithuanian political parties

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the populist discourse of Lithuanian political parties over a 30-year period: 1990–2020. Since Lithuania belongs to the CEE region, the question arises whether it is witnessing a worrying rise of populism and a related backsliding of democracy. Although Lithuania is currently a stable consolidated democracy, the lack of a stable party system and clear ideological cleavages during the transition to democracy in the 1990s created a favourable environment for populism to flourish. In this article, we analyse the changes in populist discourse in Lithuania across different actors, sources and over time. This is done by applying machine learning models to identify populist content at the paragraph level through a corpus of political party manifestos, political party websites, and columns written by party members on Delfi.lt. The results show that, although elements of populist discourse are present in the texts of all Lithuanian political parties, the overall level of populist discourse has remained fairly stable over the period analysed, with a temporary increase in 2008–2009. We observe that populist discourse is more widespread in the media than in party manifestos and that non-parliamentary parties engage in this discourse more than their parliamentary counterparts.

Keywords: populist discourse; machine learning models; political parties; Lithuania

1 Introduction

Recently, democratic backsliding has become a prominent research theme in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), focusing on populist authoritarianism in Poland and Hungary, with its roots in the post-communist transformation. Although other post-communist countries have been studied less frequently, most of them (including Lithuania) started their democracy-building process while coping with a devastating economic downturn during the transition. Lithuania is now a stable consolidated democracy. However, since the transition to democracy in the 1990s, it has been characterised by the lack of a stable party system and clear ideological cleavages, creating a favourable environment for populism to flourish. The question therefore arises whether populism as a political strategy is on the rise in Lithuania, as in other Central and Eastern European countries.

Research on populism has long been dominated by case studies that aim to profile specific politicians or political parties (Grabow & Hartleb, 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Only recently, the number of large-scale comparative studies that identify more general trends and patterns of populist discourse started increasing (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, 2014; Pauwels & Rooduijn, 2015; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Manucci & Weber, 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019). We contribute to this emerging literature by analysing large amounts of textual data over long periods, using a case that is rarely included in comparative research.

Understanding populism as a feature of discourse (Rooduijn, 2014), we conceptualise it as a discursive tactic used by different politicians. In this article, we analyse the changes in populist discourse in Lithuania over time to determine whether populist discourse is on the rise and, if so, whether this trend is consistent across different media and actors. This is done by applying machine learning models to identify populist content at the paragraph level through a corpus of three types of sources: political party manifestos, political party websites, and columns written by party members on 'Delfi.lt', the most prominent Lithuanian online news portal. Our corpus of texts covers three decades: 1990–2020. We break down each text into paragraphs and automatically code each paragraph as either people-centrist or anti-elitist. Then by aggregating these metrics by actor and year, we analyse how the pattern of populist discourse in Lithuania evolved through time.

The results show that elements of populist discourse are present in the texts of all Lithuanian political parties. However, the overall level of populist discourse has remained relatively stable over the period analysed, except for a temporary increase during the Great Financial Crisis of 2008–2009. Moreover, we observe that populist discourse is more widespread in the media than in party manifestos and that non-parliamentary parties engage in this discourse in manifestos more than their parliamentary counterparts. Despite the specific context, the insights go beyond a single case or the specificities of CEE countries and provide important incentives for further comparative empirical research on these dynamics across Europe. This study refutes the exclusivity of CEE and shows that the trends observed in Western European studies are also confirmed in this region, making further joint comparative research necessary. The text is structured as follows: in the first section, we present the overview of the previous research and our hypotheses. The second part describes the dataset we assembled for this study. In the third part, we present the results of our analysis.

2 The potential for large-scale discourse research

Populism is a contested concept: populist actors rarely use the concept to identify themselves, and instead, it is ascribed by others, usually with a negative connotation (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). As populism expresses a response to context-specific grievances (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Gherghina et al., 2013; Gagnon et al., 2018), the ideological stance of populist actors ranges from the radical right to the radical left, to neopopulism (Shafir, 2013) or centrist populism in CEE countries (Stanley, 2017). While the variety of political actors complicates systematic comparisons, a sizable body of research is devoted to studies examining specific cases of interest. These studies typically focus on a single actor (mostly

a political party) and analyse its discourse (Reungoat, 2010), main ideological elements (Rydgren, 2008) or mobilisation strategies (Rydgren, 2004).

These analyses have produced a generally accepted understanding that populism is a set of ideas lacking fundamental values (Taggart, 2002) or an undeveloped thin-centred ideology with its specific concepts (Canovan, 2002). In addition, Cas Mudde (2004, pp. 543) has formulated the most often used definition: a thin-centred ideology 'that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people'.

Recently the approach changed, and the focus has shifted towards larger-n comparative studies, seeking instead to map the general trends and patterns of populist discourse across countries, periods, or sources. In such attempts, authors usually utilise a content analysis approach whereby they seek to identify populist content in text using various units of analysis like paragraphs (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, 2014; Pauwels & Rooduijn, 2015; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017), a statement (Ernst et al., 2017; Manucci & Weber, 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019), an issue-specific claim (Bernhard et al., 2015), a sentence (Vasilopoulou et al., 2014) or a quasi-sentence (March, 2018).

Comparative analyses show that electoral manifestos are becoming more populist than in the past (Manucci & Weber, 2017; Schwörer, 2021). However, the results of populism in the media are contradictory. Some studies find that populism has become more prevalent in media debates (in newspapers) (Rooduijn, 2014; Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020), while others find that populist discourse is stable and with low prevalence (Manucci & Weber, 2017). Neither do studies of communication of populist actors over time reveal any substantial discursive explosion (Bernhard et al., 2015), and analyses of party websites (Schwörer, 2021) and press releases (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019) do not support the contagion thesis.

Despite the increasing use of comparative studies, comparisons of the prevalence of populist discourse in manifestos and the media within the party system over time are still rare. Current comparative studies are limited to radical parties (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017) and often overlook how populist sentiments are used by mainstream parties in their discourse (exceptions include Schwörer, 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2014) and how populist discourse evolves over time. Moreover, it should be noted that the vast majority of studies analysing populist discourse focus on Western Europe (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, 2014; Manucci & Weber, 2017; Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020; Schwörer, 2021; Vasilopoulou et al, 2014) while CEE and other regions remain beyond the scope of the analyses.

One explanation for the limited comparative research to date is that classical content analysis is resource- and research-intensive, limiting the scope of comparative research that can be done. Some researchers seeking to simplify the process employed semi-automation tools (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2019). This mainly involved utilising a dictionary-based approach (Pauwels, 2011). Later studies have concluded that though these semi-automated approaches' reliability is somewhat lower than the classical content analysis, both approaches generate reasonably valid results (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). With this in mind, we aim to find a way to conduct a comprehensive systematic analysis of populist discourse.

Recently, there have been particularly active attempts to use advances in machine learning and artificial intelligence for more comprehensive content analysis. It has been argued that these computational social science methods have the potential to produce in-depth insights at a massive scale, thus allowing even small research teams to carry out very large-n studies (Pukelis & Stančiauskas, 2019). Hawkins and Silva (2018) used an elastic-net regression for the supervised classification of party manifestos. Their model was able to identify very populist manifestos and very non-populist documents but did not perform very well on the documents in-between. A more recent attempt to measure populism using supervised machine learning by Di Cocco and Monechi (2022) has also generated somewhat successful results. Previous work has also demonstrated that machine learning models can be used to identify populist content in text with a high degree of accuracy (Ulinskaitė & Pukelis, 2021).

3 Defining, analysing, and explaining the prevalence of populist discourse

Despite the ongoing debate on the form of populism (strategy, discourse, or ideology), there is a consensus on the substance of populism. First, populist discourse divides society into homogeneous and antagonistic parts – the elites and the people (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Pappas, 2016). Second, politics is defined as expressing the people's general will, expecting their direct participation in the decision-making process and arguing that all other mediating institutions and actors limit their governance (Arditi, 2007). Thirdly, since populism is intertwined with democracy (Canovan, 1999) and requires representative democracy to develop (Taggart, 2002), we consider populism as a gradual phenomenon, i.e. we cannot distinguish between parties that are entirely populist and completely non-populist.

Based on what has been presented and in line with Cas Mudde's (2004, p. 543) definition, we understand populist discourse as consisting of two essential components: people-centrism (speaking of 'the people' as a single entity with the same interests) and anti-elitism (the conviction that the current ruling elite is corrupt and acts against the interests of 'the people'). In this study, we also use this minimalist definition for two reasons. First, it allows us to go beyond the distinction between left- vs. right-wing populism, which is difficult to apply unequivocally to CEE. While nativism and anti-immigration attitudes are often linked to populism, studies that have analysed populism in the region in detail conceptualize it as neo-populism (Shafir, 2013) or centrist populism (Stanley, 2017), where the ideological core is particularly narrow. More in-depth qualitative research on populism in Lithuania confirms that populist ideology in the region is not embedded in more specific ideological attitudes (Ulinskaitė, 2020). Second, the vast majority of content analyses of larger amounts of data to date have used Mudde's definition to operationalise the concept of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, 2014; Balcere, 2014; Rooduijn et al., 2014; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015; Ernst et al., 2017; Payá, 2019; Elçi, 2019, Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019). We position this study in this tradition of content analysis.

Although these two components – people-centrism and anti-elitism – often appear together, they refer to different content elements and are therefore coded separately in our

analysis. We made this decision considering recent research on anti-establishment and populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe, which suggests that anti-systemic tropes are more prevalent in the discourse and are not necessarily broadly aligned with a people-centrist orientation (Engler et al., 2019). For this reason, we code the components of populism separately. For coding, we followed the instructions suggested by (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). We coded a paragraph as people-centrist if it refers to a general category of the people as a homogeneous unit having favourable properties. It is important to distinguish when the author of the text refers to or society in general. Only when a paragraph refers to people, society, citizens, nation, instead of individuals, distinct groups of society (e.g. women, children, pensioners), we code it as people-centrist (e.g. 'This requires fundamental changes in the economy to ensure that it can support rising investment, job creation and better lives for people'). In addition, we code a paragraph as people-centrist when singular words such as a person or a citizen in the text refer not to a specific individual but an individual representing the whole. We identify anti-elitism if a paragraph refers to the elite as a homogeneous group having negative properties (e.g. 'Against corrupt politicians! For ordinary people!'). A paragraph is coded as anti-elitist when the criticism is generalised to the government, politicians, bureaucracy, oligarchy, financial, cultural, or academic elites. When criticism is expressed to specific political parties or officeholders, we do not consider it anti-elitism.[1]

In our approach, and in line with the minimalist approach, populism is primarily defined as a discursive strategy political actors use across the ideological spectrum. This strategy is best reflected in the discourse they shape. Therefore, drawing on theoretical conceptualisations, in this analysis, we consider populism primarily as a textual attribute rather than a characteristic of politicians (Rooduijn, 2014). By analysing the discourse, we can identify political parties that produce larger or smaller volumes of populist content.

Despite a fairly large body of existing research, we know relatively little about what factors could explain the volume of populist discourse the political parties employ. In this article, we aim to investigate if populism became more prevalent in political discourse. We already know that since the 1990s, populism has become more prevalent in political and media discourse due to globalisation and mediatisation (Mudde, 2004). Comparative analyses show that electoral manifestos are becoming more populist than in the past (Manucci & Weber, 2017; Schwörer, 2021). Considering that a lack of a well-structured party system and established ideological cleavages provided a fertile ground for populism to flourish in Lithuania, we hypothesise that levels of populism must have increased across both media sources and manifestos.

H1. Over time, the level of populism in the discourse of political parties, both in the media and in manifestos, increased.

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[1] In the first phase of coding, two different coding techniques were used to code the data by the same researcher. The first coded people centrism and anti-elitism in relation to the entire content of the paragraph, while the second relied on a dictionary approach to test the reliability of the coding of people centrism. For this, the text was searched for words such as people, society, civil society, population, nation. Cohen's kappa varied from 0.75 to 0.92 (except for 0.5 for a manifesto of only several paragraphs). Given that the coding of the content of the whole paragraph is a more reserved coding principle than the dictionary principle, the correspondence of the coding is considered sufficient (see Pukelis & Stančiauskas, 2018).

We also compare the prevalence of populist discourse in official party documents as well as politicians' discourse in media sources, expecting to find more populism in the latter. Political parties' manifestos are the most important documents that articulate their vision of how policies should be implemented and communicate this vision to voters, media, and other politicians (Schwörer, 2021). Nevertheless, they are often formal, short documents, making it harder to detect populist features than in media articles. The intended audience explains the difference: the language is more vivid when communication is oriented towards the public sphere and the electorate (Pauwels, 2011).

Because of the immense importance of the media for electoral success, research on populism has also begun to look at populist communication and interaction with media (mainstream, fringe, social etc.). There seems to be a general consensus that media functions as a tool for populist politics to increase the popular vote (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Moreover, the media provide populist politicians with the opportunity to disseminate their policies to a larger audience than just through manifestos (Wodak et al., 2013). Research shows that the mainstream media facilitate the visibility of populist actors by increasing their political appeal through sensational headlines. As a result, populist parties successfully employ media resources to 'build popularity and achieve electoral gains' (Norocel & Szabó, 2019; Kasekamp et al., 2019).

Many studies particularly focus on the broader media ecosystem and the place of populist media sources within it (see, for example, Szabó et al., 2019). In this paper, we instead follow the line of 'mainstreaming populism' and investigate the place of populist discourse in mainstream media. The 'mainstreaming of extremes' is observed when populist politicians are given more attention in the media, leading to the successful representation of their discourse in public debates (Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015; Norocel & Szabó, 2019). In this case, we expect that Delfi.lt, Lithuania's largest online news portal, will become an excellent venue for populist politicians to elaborate on their populist positions, which are less emphasised in manifestos.

H2: The level of populism in media content is more pronounced than in political manifestos.

Finally, previous studies show that populist communication is more pronounced in the discourse of more radical political parties (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019). Parties on the fringes of the political spectrum (Schmidt, 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), as well as new parties (Payá, 2019), are in a convenient position to criticise the political elite for being closed to outsiders, being malevolent and acting against the interests of the people. Therefore, political parties that are unlikely to form a government are expected to use populist discourse to attract the attention of voters strategically.

On the other hand, it is not clear whether this trend applies to the CEE region. When analysing CEE parties, research has found that many anti-systemic political parties are not based on ideological extremes but on the middle of the left-right scale (Engler et al., 2019). One plausible explanation is that centrist political parties are strongly populist but not extreme. On the other hand, they may also not be populist at all. Therefore, to investi-

gate this in more detail, we hypothesise that non-parliamentary parties, irrespective of their position on the ideological scale of right and left, generate more populist discourse in Lithuania.

H3: Populism is more prevalent in the discourse of non-parliamentary political parties than in that of parliamentary parties.

4 Data and Methods

4.1 Corpus of Lithuanian Political Party Texts

For this study, we have assembled an original dataset of Lithuanian Political Party texts. The corpus of texts consists of three main components: Political Party Election Manifestos (1992–2019), texts from 'Delfi.lt' section 'Through the eyes of a politician' (lt. *Politiko akimis*) (2005–2020) and texts from the websites of political parties (2018–2020). We consider the texts from 'Delfi.lt' and texts from the political party websites as our media corpus. We have collected over 30,000 paragraphs of manifestos and more than 133,000 paragraphs of media content (see Table 1).[2]

Table 1 Paragraph counts in media and manifesto corpora

	Paragraph Count	**Share in the final corpus (%)**
Manifestos	30 972	19
Media	133 303	81
Total	159 168	100

Source: Created by the authors

First, we started by collecting and processing the manifestos of political parties. We obtained party election manifestos for all the parties and the election periods that were available in the database of the Lithuanian National Electoral Commission or on the websites of political parties. Since these data sources did not cover the earliest elections in the 1990s, where possible, we supplemented that data with items from the Comparative Manifesto Project database. Table 2 lists the number of paragraphs in the manifesto corpus for each election period and the names of the parties with available manifestos for each election period. We use abbreviated party names in Table 2 and the rest of the paper. The mapping between the party names and their abbreviations can be found in Annex 1 of the paper.

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[2] Data and code used in this paper can be found on GitHub (https://github.com/lukas-pkl/lt-populism).

Table 2 Size and coverage of Manifesto corpus

Election Year	Paragraph Count	Share in corpus (%)	Manifestos Covered
2020	7247	23.3	'DK', 'DP', 'KRIKSCIONIU_SAJUNGA', 'LLP', 'LLRA', 'LP', 'LRLS', 'LSDDP', 'LSDP', 'LVZS', 'LZP', 'Laisve_Teisingumas', 'Lietuva_Visu', 'Lietuvos_Sarasas', 'NS', 'TS-LKD'
2016	6680	21.5	'DK', 'DP', 'LLP', 'LLRA', 'LRLS', 'LSDP', 'LVZS', 'LZP', 'Lietuvos_Sarasas', 'PUTEIKIS', 'TS-LKD', 'TT', 'TAUT'
2012	4387	14.1	'DK', 'DP', 'Front', 'LIC', 'LKP', 'LLRA', 'LRLS', 'LSDP', 'LVZS', 'Liaudies_Sajunga', 'Nacionalines_Vienybes_Sajunga', 'Respublikonu_Partija', 'TS-LKD', 'TT', 'ZUOK'
2008	3459	11.1	'CP', 'DP', 'Front', 'LIC', 'LLRA', 'LRLS', 'LSDP', 'LSDS', 'Lietuvos_Rusu_Sajunga', 'NaujSaj', 'Pilietines_Demokratijos_Partija', 'TPP', 'TS-LKD', 'TT'
2004	2099	6.7	'CP', 'DP', 'LIC', 'LKDP', 'LKP', 'LLRA', 'LSDP', 'LSDS', 'LVZS', 'Lietuvos_Kelias', 'Lietuvos_Sarasas', 'Respublikonu_Partija', 'TS-LKD', 'TT', 'TAUT'
2000	3972	12.8	'LCS', 'LKDP', 'LKDS', 'LLRA', 'LLS', 'LPKTS', 'LRLS', 'LSDP', 'Liaudies_Sajunga', 'NaujSaj', 'TS-LKD', 'TAUT'
1996	2118	6.8	'LCS', 'LDDP', 'LDP', 'LKDP', 'LSDP', 'TS-LKD'
1992	1010	3.2	'LCS', 'LDDP', 'LDP', 'LKDP', 'LLRA', 'LPKTS', 'LSDP', 'TAUT'

Source: Created by the authors

The second source of data was the media texts authored by the party members from the largest Lithuanian web news portal 'Delfi.lt'. We have chosen this news portal due to several reasons. First, it is the most popular news portal among Lithuanians (Gemius, 2022). Second, it is the oldest still-functioning Lithuanian online news portal. Importantly, it has a large and accessible data archive going back to the early 2000s, which is a unique and valuable source of historical data. Third, Delfi.lt does not noticeably lean right or left (Jastramskis & Plepytė-Davidavičienė 2021) and the politicians from all major parties regularly publish there. We have collected data from the section called 'Through the eyes of a politician', which is dedicated to the media content authored by politicians. This data source covered the period from 2005 until 2021. We collected around 55,000 paragraphs of this type of media content (see Table 3).

Table 3 Size and coverage of Media corpus

Sources	Paragraph Count	Share in corpus (%)
delfi.lt/	54 667	41
tsajunga.lt/	24 445	18.3
darbopartija.lt/	18 577	13.9
lsdp.lt/	10 933	8.2
liberalai.lt/	6 238	4.6
lsddp.org/	5 942	4.4
lvzs.lt/lt/	5 655	4.2
awpl.lt/?lang=lt	5 200	3.9
propatria.lt/	1 373	1
tvarka.lt/	273	0.2
Total:	133 303	100

Source: Created by the authors

The third data source was news items and commentaries from the websites of the major political parties. We consider messages on the parties' websites to be media content. Unlike the opinion pieces on Delfi.lt, we believe that the texts are more oriented towards party members and supporters and, therefore, more often express the party line. We have chosen the websites of the largest Lithuanian political parties, which won two or more seats in the 2016 parliamentary elections.:

1. Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats
2. Lithuanian Social Democratic Party
3. Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union
4. Labour Party
5. Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance
6. Liberals' Movement
7. The Social Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania (later Lithuanian Regional Party)
8. Party 'Order and Justice'

We sought to collect all the data available on the party website for these parties. However, the actual amount of collected data and the temporal coverage varied considerably from 24,445 paragraphs of the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats to 273 paragraphs of the Party 'Order and Justice'.

We also included the webpage of the movement 'Pro Patria' which is closely affiliated with the political party The National Alliance (lt. *Nacionalinis susivienijimas*). Though The National Alliance is not a major party, it is ideologically similar to Swedish Democrats and Polish PiS – archetypical populist parties. For this reason, we also deemed it valuable to include them in the analysis. A breakdown of the Media corpus by source can be found in Table 3.

5 Method of detecting populism in text

To identify the populist paragraphs in both corpora, we used a pre-trailed machine learning model. The procedure used to train the model, and its performance benchmarks are described in the methods note (Ulinskaitė & Pukelis, 2021). In short, we have assembled an extensive corpus of texts from various sources, including the manifestos of many political parties identified as populist in the literature. We then broke down these texts into paragraphs and manually labelled them. During the labelling, we looked for two distinct dimensions of populism – Anti-Elitism (AE) and People-Centrism (PC). Using the labelled data, we have developed a machine-learning model which would 'learn' to recognise PC or AE paragraphs in the new text.

To be more precise, for machine learning, we used the following approach: we vectorised (turned words into sequences of numbers) the texts using a pre-trained BERT model developed by Google Research (Devlin et al. 2018). BERT is a large transformer neural network pre-trained for natural language understanding tasks on Google Books corpus. Since its publication in 2018, BERT has been widely adopted for text-classification tasks, and several studies have demonstrated that BERT can outperform other commonly used approaches (González-Carvajal & Garrido-Merchán, 2020). After vectorising the input texts with BERT, we perform the actual classification using an ensemble of commonly used ML models: Logistic Regression, Naive Bayes, Support Vector Machines, MLP, and K-NN – all from Python's SKLearn library (Pedregosa et al., 2012). The ML model ensemble achieved F1 scores of 0.79 and 0.85 PC and AE, respectively. We chose this approach over using a fine-tuned BERT model because it offers more flexibility i.e. it allows adjusting the balance between precision and recall by tuning the hyper-parameters of the models, which would not be possible with the fine-tuned BERT model.

We used the same text pre-processing procedures for the Lithuanian corpora as for the training dataset used in model development. Before classification, all the texts in both corpora were broken into paragraphs, and each paragraph was automatically translated into English using Google Translate. This approach has been adopted because recent advances in Google Translate have enabled high-quality machine translation (Caswell & Liang, 2020). After translation, the pre-trained ML models were used to determine whether the paragraph could be classified as 'People-Centric' and/or 'Anti-Elitist' – two constituent dimensions of populism we use in our approach.

Prior to the main analysis, we performed a separate evaluation to assess the extent to which the model can successfully label texts from the Lithuanian political parties. We already had some Lithuanian party manifestos from the 2016 and 2020 elections coded using this scheme (Ulinskaitė, 2020), and we could use this dataset to validate the model performance. The model performed reasonably well, with an F1 score of ~0.9 for each dimension.

In the analysis section, we will present the results as they were coded, i.e. we will maintain the distinction between the anti-elitism (AE) and people-centrism (PC) as two dimensions of populism. We find this distinction significant because the two dimensions do not necessarily follow the same trends, and populist parties might express more people-centrism than anti-elitism (or vice versa) in some cases and not in others.

6 Results

6.1 Comparing populism prevalence in media and in manifestos

We start our analysis with an overview of the change in the amount of people-centrist and anti-elitist paragraphs over time in two data sources – manifestos and media (see Figure 1). The x-axis represents time, while the y-axis indicates the share of content. The results from the manifesto corpus are presented as bar charts, while the media corpus results are represented as line graphs. The people-centrism (PC) results are in lighter grey, and the anti-elitism (AE) results are in black.

**Figure 1** Share of populist content in party manifestos and media
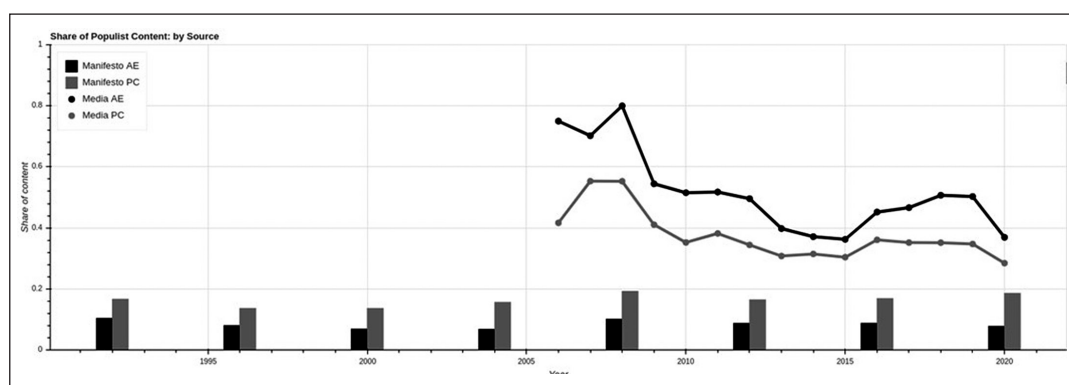
Source: Created by the authors

The graph shows that the level of populist statements in the discourse of Lithuanian political parties, contrary to expectations, has remained stable over time. This trend is particularly pronounced in party manifestos, where the proportion of people-centrist and anti-elitist paragraphs has never exceeded a fifth of the total. The manifestos of Lithuanian political parties are more people-centrist than anti-elitist. Meanwhile, the proportions of people-oriented and anti-elitist paragraphs in media content are reversed: in the media, politicians are more likely to criticise the elite than to address the people. As observed in previous studies (Pauwels, 2011), the overall proportion of populist content in the media is consistently higher than in party manifestos.

When we break the results down by the political party, we see that the political parties popularly dubbed as being populist, namely the Socialist People's Front, the Puteikis-Krivickas Coalition Against Corruption/Puteikis+, the Lithuanian Nationalist and Republican Union and the Political party 'The Way of Courage', have the highest shares of both people-centrism and anti-elitism both in media content and in manifestos. Overall, we find more populist paragraphs in media content than in the manifestos, except for people-centrism in the manifestos of the Socialist People's Front, the Christian Union and the Political party 'Lithuanian List' and anti-elitism in The Liberal Union of Lithuania. The only political party that was more populist in its manifesto but mainstream in its media content turned out to be the Political party 'Lithuanian List'. See Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2 People-centrism by party
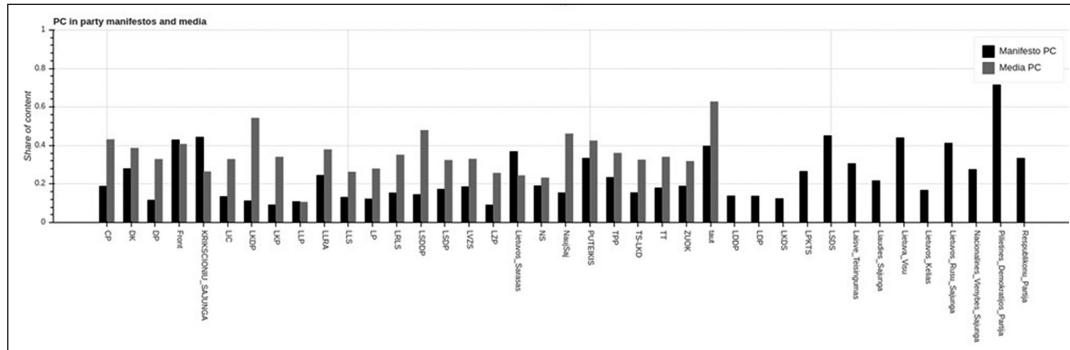
Source: Created by the authors

Figure 3 Anti-elitism by party
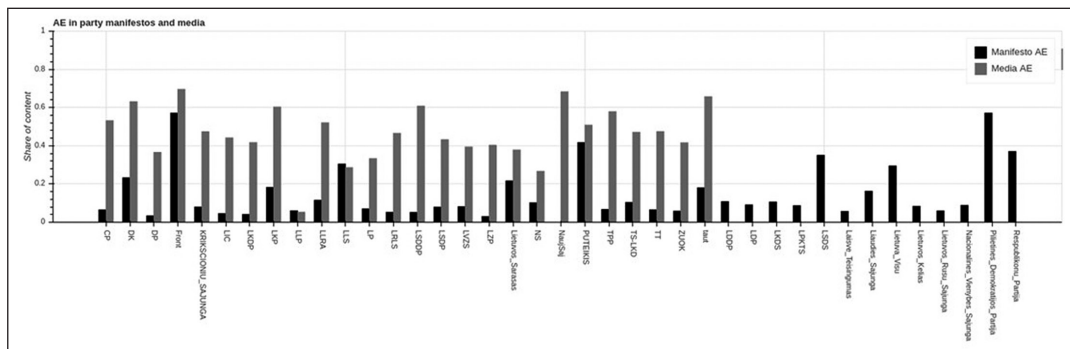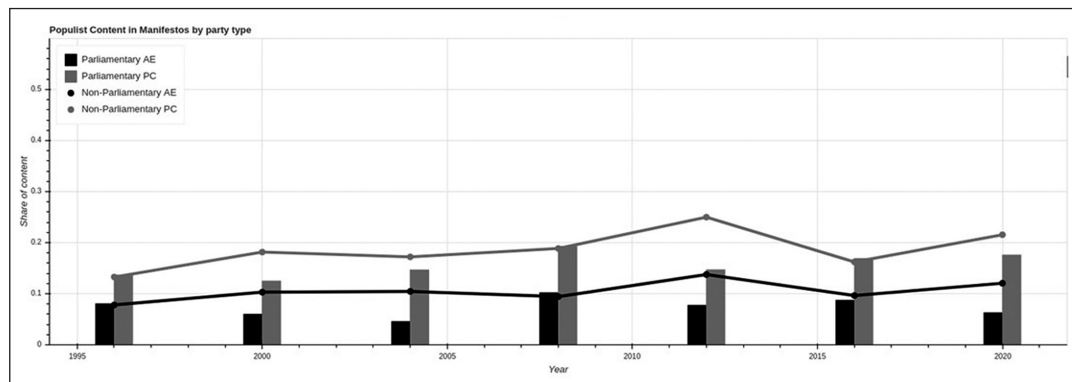

Source: Created by the authors

Regarding anti-elitism, in the media political parties are much more likely to be critical of elites than express people-centrism. Moreover, in many cases, the intense criticism of the elite in the media does not necessarily translate into manifestos: we see that, in terms of anti-elitism, manifestos often lag far behind the content of the media.

The results also reveal that the Lithuanian political parties most often considered populist in comparative studies – the Labour Party and the Party 'Order and Justice' – do not seem discursively different from other political parties. It is evident that Party 'Order and Justice' is slightly more people-centrist than other political parties but is not more critical of the elite in general. Nor do the manifestos of the Labour Party seem to be more populist than those of other political parties. Although unexpected, these results are in line with previous studies (Ulinskaitė, 2021), showing that political parties the Labour Party and the Party 'Order and Justice', most often identified as populist in the research, did not have strong populist features in their manifestos. A possible interpretation of the results is that both parties, based on the charisma of strong leaders, are generating much more populist discourse in social media and face-to-face interactions with voters, rather than in traditional data sources such as websites, traditional media and manifestos. This only confirms once again the chameleon-like nature of populist organizations and politicians. On the other hand, it can also be suggested that populist sentiment is often assessed not in terms of the volume of discourse but in terms of its radicalism.

An interesting case is the discourse of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance, an ethnic minority party, which is still one of the most anti-elitist among the parliamentary parties. The party's manifestos have been among the most people-centrist of the parliamentary parties analysed. The result is paradoxical, indicating that ethnic minority parties can address both the specific minority they represent and the people in general. It seems that representing a minority and the people's general will is not contradictory in this case.

Finally, in Figure 4, we compare the parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. We considered the party parliamentary if it won at least two mandates during the parliament election. The Figure shows that the manifestos of the non-parliamentary parties contain more people-centrist and anti-elitist paragraphs than those of the parliamentary parties in 4 out of 7 elections. However, the differences are relatively small.

Figure 4 Populism in the discourse of parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties

Source: Created by the authors

The populist discourse in the manifestos of non-parliamentary parties was at its peak in 2012. Before the parliament elections, two political scandals broke out, leading to anti-establishment protests and the emergence of two new political parties – the Political party 'Lithuanian List' and Political party 'The Way of Courage.' The latter managed to win seven seats in the 2012 Seimas elections (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2012). In addition, several new anti-establishment parties took part in the elections, such as The Emigrant Party or the 'For Lithuania in Lithuania' party. However, none of them managed to cross the five per cent threshold to enter parliament.

7 Explaining the prevalence of populist discourse

The next step of our analysis was conducting an OLS regression analysis of our data. Here the unit of analysis is a single document from our corpus. We ran two sets of models with two different dependent variables: in one set, the dependent variable was the share of anti-elitist content in the document, while in the second set, that was the share of the people-centric content in the document.

In all models, we used a dummy variable 'Manifesto' to denote whether the document is a party electoral manifesto. We also used a dummy variable for whether the party had any seats in the parliament at the time of document publication. The third set of factors relates to time. In the first set of models, we use 'Years after independence' obtained by subtracting 1990 from the year of document publication. In the second set of models, we use two-decade dummies: 'First decade' (1990–2000) and 'Second decade' (2000–2010). In the third set of models, we use a dummy for the period of the Great Financial Crisis (2008–2010). The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Results of OLS regression analysis

	Anti-Elitism			People-Centrism		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Manifesto	−0.25 (0.04) ***	−0.39 (0.05)***	−0.33 (0.04)***	−0.13 (0.03)***	−0.1 (0.04)*	−0.1 (0.03)**
Parliamentary party	0.08 (0.02)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.06 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***
Years after independence	0.01 (0.001) ***			−0.003 (0.001)**		
First decade		0.05 (0.1)			−0.1 (0.1)	
Second decade		0.18 (0.05)**			−0.02 (0.05)	
Financial crisis			0.21 (0.07)***			0.02 (0.06)
R^2	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.003	0.003	0.003
N	16 567	16 567	16 567	16 567	16 567	16 567

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $0.001 < p < 0.01$, * $0.01 < p < 0.05$

Source: Created by the authors

The first thing to note is that the explanatory power of our model (R^2) is relatively low. However, this is to be expected as the model contains only a few systematic independent variables. The explanatory power of the model could likely be increased by adding party-level variables, such as the parties' positions on the economic left-right or GAL-TAN scale or variables related to whether a party was in the ruling coalition at the time of publication of a given text. However, these steps are beyond the scope and objectives of this article. Our aim here is to understand the broad patterns and tendencies in the Lithuanian political system as a whole rather than to explain what factors explain the level of populism in the discourse of a particular party.

The results provide mixed support for our hypotheses. First, we see that for the dimension of anti-elitism (AE) 'Year after independence' has a significant effect in the first model. However, this effect is relatively small and statistically significant only due to a very large sample. Furthermore, the second and third models show that the effect is not linear – in the second decade of independence or, more precisely, during the Great Financial Crisis, there was an upsurge of anti-elitism in the discourse of Lithuanian political parties. This is in line with previous studies that have shown that during the Great Finan-

cial Crisis, there was a stronger than usual anti-elitist sentiment, which led to a harsher than usual electoral punishment of the incumbent parties (Talving, 2017; 2018). We do not observe any significant effect of the time dimension on the people-oriented (PC) component of party rhetoric.

However, we note a slight increase in both people-centrist and anti-elitist paragraphs in the 2008 election manifestos and media. This increase probably reflects the debate during the financial crisis, when parties often referred to the common good of the people in their rhetoric. However, we can see that 2007–2008 is more of an exception and that the level of populist discourse has remained stable since the 1990s. Therefore, we do not confirm H1.

Nevertheless, the models strongly support our second hypothesis. Indeed, we see that the 'Manifesto' dummy has a strong negative and significant effect in all models. This means that both dimensions of populism are significantly less present in electoral manifestos. We also observe that the effect size of the AE dimension is larger than that of the PC dimension. This implies that especially the anti-elitist rhetoric is toned down in the manifestos. We can speculate that this happens because political parties try to appear more pragmatic and professional in their manifestos. An alternative explanation would suggest that political parties are more inclined to criticise a specific part of the political elite, i.e. their opponents, rather than the elite as a whole.

Finally, the parliamentary party dummy has a significant effect in all models. However, the effect is in the opposite direction. We suspect this is due to the large number of media texts in our dataset (which contain more populist content and are more often published by parliamentary parties). Therefore, we re-sampled the models using only party manifestos (Table 5). The results are in line with our expectations – in the manifesto corpus, the effect runs in the expected direction, with the non-parliamentary parties having significantly higher shares of the populist content in both dimensions.

Table 5 Results of OLS regression analysis (manifestos only)

	Anti-Elitism			People-Centrism		
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Parliamentary party	−0.1257 (0.028)***	−0.1263 (0.028)***	−0.117 (0.028) ***	−0.074 (0.03)*	−0.072 (0.03)*	−0.057 (0.03)
Years after independence	0.0025 (0.002)			0.005 (0.002)**		
First decade		−0.08 (0.042)			−0.14 (0.005) **	
Second decade		−0.014 (0.03)			−0.046 (0.035)	
Financial crisis			0.03 (0.04)			0.022 (0.04)
R^2	0.176	0.188	0.16	0.103	0.109	0.032
N	100	100	100	100	100	100

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $0.001 < p < 0.01$, * $0.01 < p < 0.05$

Source: Created by the authors

8 Conclusions

In this article, we aimed to contribute to the emerging trend of larger-n comparative studies of populism by analysing the populist discourse of Lithuanian political parties in the period 1990–2020. We conceptualise populism as a feature of discourse rather than a speaker, and we assume that all political parties can use populist discourse to some extent. We operationalise populism as consisting of two dimensions – people-centrism and anti-elitism – which we code and analyse separately.

The paper used an original dataset of Lithuanian political party texts and performed large-scale quantitative text analysis using a pre-trained machine-learning model. This approach allowed us to carry out a very large-scale analysis across a long period of time and cover a vast majority of the Lithuanian political parties – a feat that would have been impossible otherwise.

Our results show that, contrary to our expectations, the level of populism has not increased over time. In fact, we observe that during the period of the Great Financial Crisis (2008–2010), anti-elitist rhetoric increased. However, it is important to note that during the crisis, we have only seen an increase in one dimension of populism – anti-elitism – while the second dimension of populism – people-centrism – has not increased significantly.

In addition, we also found that, as in previous studies on other contexts, parties are significantly more likely to use populist rhetoric in the media compared to party manifestos. This is probably related to political parties trying to appear professional and pragmatic in their manifestos. We also find evidence that the proportion of populist content in the manifestos of non-parliamentary parties is higher in both dimensions. The populist discourse in the manifestos of non-parliamentary parties was at its peak in 2012, during the elections after the Great Financial Crisis, probably culminating in the aftermath of the recession.

Despite its specific context, this study refutes the exclusivity of CEE and shows that the trends observed in Western European studies are also valid in this region. Therefore, these results are not limited to a single case or the specificities of the CEE countries and provide an important stimulus for further comparative empirical research.

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Annex

Annex Mapping between the party names and abbreviations

Party Name	Party Name EN	Abbreviation
Centro Partija	Center Party	CP
Drąsos Kelias	Way of Courage	DK
Darbo Partija	Labor Party	DP
Frontas	Socialist Popular Front	Front
Krikščionių Sąjunga	Christian Union	KRIKSCIONIU_SAJUNGA
Liberalų Centro Sąjunga	Liberal-Center Union	LIC
Lietuvos Krikščionių Demokratų Partija	Lithuanian Christian-Democratic party	LKDP
Lietuvos Krikščionių Partija	Lithuanian Christian Party	LKP
Lietuvos Liaudies Partija	People's Party	LLP
Lietuvos Lenkų Rinkimų Akcija	Polish Electoral Action	LLRA
Lietuvos Liberalų Sąjunga	Liberal Union	LLS
Laisvės Partija	Freedom Party	LP
Lietuvos Respublikos Liberalų Sąjūdis	Lithuanian Liberal Movement	LRLS
Lietuvos Socialdemokratinė Darbo Partija	Lithuanian Social Democratic Labor Party	LSDDP
Lietuvos Socialdemokratų Partija	Lithuanian Social Democratic Party	LSDP
Lietuvos Valstiečių Žaliųjų Sąjunga	Lithuanian Union of Greens and Farmers	LVZS
Lietuvos Žaliųjų Partija	Lithuanian Green Party	LZP
Lietuvos Sąrašas	Lithuania's List	Lietuvos_Sarasas
Nacionalinis Susivienijimas	National Union	NS
Naujoji Sąjunga	New Union	NaujSaj
Antikorupcinė Puteikio ir Krivicko Koalicija / Puteikis+	Puteikis-Krivickas Coalition Against Corruption/Puteikis+	PUTEIKIS
Tautos Prisikėlimo Partija	National Resurrection Party	TPP
Tėvynės Sąjunga	Homeland Union	TS-LKD
Tvarka ir Teisingumas	Order and Justice	TT

Party Name	Party Name EN	Abbreviation
Lietuvos Laisvės Sąjunga (liberalai)/ TAIP	Lithuanian Freedom Union/ YES	ZUOK
Tautininkų Sąjunga	Nationalist Union	TAUT
Lietuvos Demokratinė Darbo Partija	Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party	LDDP
Lietuvos Demokratų Partija	Lithuanian Democratic Party	LDP'
Lietuvos Krikščionių Demokratų Sąjunga	Lithuanian Christian Democratic Union	LKDS
Lietuvos Politinių Kalinių ir Tremtinių Sąjunga	Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees	LPKTS
Lietuvos Socialdemokratų Sąjunga	Lithuanian Social Democratic Union	LSDS
Laisvė ir Teisingumas	Freedom and Justice	Laisve_Teisingumas
Liaudies Sąjunga	Popular Union	Liaudies_Sajunga
Lietuva Visų	Lithuania for Everyone	Lietuva_Visu
Lietuvos Kelias	Lithuanian Way	Lietuvos_Kelias
Lietuvos Rusų Sąjunga	Lithuanian Russian Union	Lietuvos_Rusu_Sajunga
Nacionalinės Vienybės Sąjunga	Union of National Unity	Nacionalines_Vienybes_Sajunga
Pilietinės Demokratijos Partija	Civic Democracy Party	Pilietines_Demokratijos_Partija
Respublikonų Partija	Republican Party	Respublikonu_Partija